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SIPDIS
TELEGRAM

October 14, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 4597 - ROUTINE)
TAGS: ECON, PREL, PGOV, KPAO
Captions: None
Subject: UAE HOSTS FIRST ECONOMIC BUSINESSWOMEN'S FORUM
Ref: None

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 04597

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 004597

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STATE FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ARP, G/IWI

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: ECON PREL PGOV KWMN KPAO KMPI TC
SUBJECT: UAE HOSTS FIRST ECONOMIC BUSINESSWOMEN'S FORUM

REF: ABU DHABI 4402

¶1. Summary: A U.S. delegation from the Embassy and the Department attended the First Economic Businesswomen's Forum, held in Abu Dhabi, October 7-10, under the patronage of Shaykha Fatima bint Mubarak, wife of UAE President Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan. Shaykha Fatima did not attend the forum. Touted as the first women's forum that seeks to carve out a more active economic role for women in the Arab world, the conference drew approximately 600 attendees (significantly more than the 400 expected) representing several Arab countries, one South Asian country, Europe and the U.S. To many of the participants' disappointment, the forum lacked both substance and structure once the introductory remarks from several prominent speakers concluded. There were no

new reports or statistical updates offered.

¶12. As with many conferences, however, the real action took place on the margins of the official meetings. U.S. officials participated in several important side meetings with key UAE contacts. Forum organizers expressed the hope that other attendees also used the event to gain networking contacts, as well as a shot of entrepreneurial confidence to take back to their respective countries. End Summary.

¶13. The forum's theme was "Business Women Projects: Between Reality and Ambition." Opening remarks from UAE First Lady Shaykha Fatima, who does not appear with mixed male and female audiences, were delivered in her absence by a personal assistant. The Ambassador read remarks by NEA/DAS Cheney, who was unable to travel to the UAE. Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues Charlotte Ponticelli also offered introductory comments, which were well-received. Ponticelli took the opportunity to discuss the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and how it will assist women entrepreneurs in partner countries. Other speakers included the president of the Council for Arab Business Women, president of the UAE Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and a representative from the Arab League.

¶14. Key presenters in the working sessions included Princess Basma bint Talal of the Jordanian National Women Affairs Committee, Saudi Princess Reem bint Al Waleed bin Talal of the Kingdom Holding Company, Deputy Parliamentarian Bahia Al Hariri from Lebanon, and Mrs. Afaf Zainalabedin of the First Islamic Investment Bank of Bahrain. The majority of speakers presented theoretical papers covering topics such as "Investment Observing Duty and Rights," "Our Enterprises and the Global Investment," "Investment in the Arab World," and "Difficulties Facing Women in Business." One reoccurring theme was the effect of globalization on the Arab world. Speakers repeatedly warned against sacrificing Arab culture to "Western" economic influences. The more emphatic the warnings, it seemed, the louder the approval from the audience. Some speakers clearly instructed participants to take steps to preserve their culture through partnering with each other, to avoid becoming "victims" of development (Note: Sponsors of the conference included Shell and Chevron. End Note.).

¶15. There was little solid "how-to" advice offered to entrepreneurs in the audience. Some disappointed participants discussed this deficiency between working sessions, while others pointed it out during the forum's sole question-and-answer session. The hall was packed on the first morning. However, as the day progressed, attendance dwindled, and the second day's working sessions were sparsely attended. The remainder of the conference's events were social in nature, including a tour (which was cancelled), a jewelry show, shopping and dinner in Dubai.

¶16. Arguably, side meetings were the most beneficial events of the forum. In addition to a one-hour meeting with the Ambassador, Ponticelli, Senior Advisor David Pollock, Econoff and Poloff met with key Emirati contacts from the Executive Board of the National Businesswomen's Committee and the General Women's Union. Ponticelli also had several opportunities to meet informally with participants who approached her with questions about USG policies, and with suggestions for MEPI projects. Additionally, Econoff and Poloff were able to strengthen Embassy working relationships with important Emirati contacts.

¶17. One of the ideas that may prove to be worthy of MEPI consideration is the establishment of a U.S./UAE businesswomen's network, linking UAE entrepreneurs with established U.S. businesswomen who would serve as mentors. This network could also be used to bring prominent U.S. businesswomen to the UAE as speakers or to hold workshops. Another idea that could qualify under the PAO MEPI pillar involves the establishment of U.S./Arab educational centers. The woman who introduced this idea agreed to provide the Embassy further information about her plan. At another side

meeting, a prominent Emirati businesswoman with links to an organization that promotes stress-reduction through breathing and meditation requested technical assistance from Ponticelli to promote her program, at no expense to USG, in Iraq.

¶8. Ponticelli received red-carpet treatment from conference organizers throughout her visit. A high-profile Emirati businesswoman escorted her both at the conference and to social events afterwards, and she met with Arab businesswomen at the highest levels. At all functions, she sat in VIP areas and received the same top-level courtesies reserved for other non-royal dignitaries.

¶9. Ponticelli did not have the opportunity to clear this cable before her departure.

ALBRIGHT